

# R.S.P.C.M.A.

by

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1.

Tom didn't actually consider himself a thief. In his heart, he thought of himself as basically a decent young chap. But when a decent young chap hasn't eaten for several days and is stuck in Greece without a drachma to his name, well that decent young chap starts to think that sometimes a body has to do slightly impious deeds if it wants to go on being a body.

Tom had been sleeping in a little nook he had found in the city of Thessaloniki, outside some old abandoned and overgrown Ottoman imaret. One splendid thing about jolly old Greece, Tom would admit, was that the weather was often so warm that at least that was one thing you didn't have to bother about too much when you had to sleep outdoors. A terrible rumble from his stomach reminded Tom that he was going to have to concentrate on the matter of obtaining money for some food. Hidden in the long grass surrounding the imaret, Tom had a splendid view of a café just across the road where, as in all over Greece, the locals sat in deep thought and deeper conversation over their little cups of thick coffee, their cigarettes, and the occasional glass of beer if the day became particularly heated. There was a great noise and bustle coming from the café and Tom's ears perked up when he heard somebody booming in English. Ah, a tourist! Tom reasoned with himself that if he had to steal from somebody to survive, he'd much rather not bother the inhabitants with that sort of thing. He was a guest in their country, after all.

The English noise in question was coming from a large woman who had the sort of broad physique that is made for a good bit of booming. When one is built like a Viking opera singer, it would be a shame to let such a gift go to waste. She was wearing large clunky brown boots and a pair of short trousers that was covered with a good many pockets that Tom presumed were all stuffed with various practical-seeming items. She also had on a bright, if occasionally stained, floral blouse, and a rather dusty and worn-out floppy gardening hat. Best of all, Tom noted that she had a very large satchel on the seat besides her, that she must have lain down for a moment so that she could more expressively wave her gigantic arms about to add some brio to

her booming.

Tom steeled himself to the task. He stretched his legs, since he reflected that it would be very embarrassing for him to cramp up halfway through his little felony. Taking a deep breath, he moved quietly out from the grass around the imaret towards the satchel. The big lady still had her back to him and now seemed to have reached Act Two of her operatic shouting. Gingerly and silently, Tom reached for the satchel, and as soon as his fingers closed on the strap, he turned and scurried away as quickly and as quietly as he could. He felt entirely terrified, his poor suffering stomach now having to handle nauseating anxiety on top of hunger, while his shaking legs felt keen to sprint off. Tom took a deep breath, made a promise to his stomach that he'd look after it soon if only it just behaved itself for a little longer, and demanded that his shaking legs move slowly and nonchalantly, because drawing attention to himself by running off might end very badly.

Unfortunately, at that moment, the Valkyrie paused in her booming and noticed her missing satchel. Turning, she caught sight of Tom. Naturally she didn't look at all pleased. This was good news for Tom's twitching legs, because now was the time to let them do their thing, and without another thought Tom promptly dashed up the hill. If he could make it to the small alleyways, Tom hoped he could escape in that confusing old mess of passages. His heart sunk as he heard the stampede of what could only be the gigantic woman chasing him.

"Stop, you little dog! Come back, thief!" she roared at him, adding a few choice heartfelt expletives in tolerably good rude Greek.

Worst of all, Tom realised as he chanced a look behind him, the woman was rather a lot faster on those mighty legs than he had expected.

Yet, speeding on, dashing right and left, he was filled with the certain exhilaration that he was going to outdistance her in this chase. Just as he allowed himself the distracting thought of wondering what of value might be in the bag and what manner of humble feast he might be able to buy, dreams of a bowl of beans in sauce and creamy potatoes tumbled from Tom's head as he found himself unexpectedly collapsing to the ground.

Confused, Tom squinted up from the uneven surface of the street to discover that he had come a cropper due to the untimely obstruction of a thin leg.

This thin leg was connected to an equally thin woman who looked

rather as if she had dressed to swan about with the rich and sophisticated at a party rather than lurk in back streets. Her trousers and blouse were made of black silk that even a philistine like Tom could see were probably terribly expensive, and her hair, capped in a stylish cloche hat, peeked out with impeccable curls. To complete the picture of bored elegance, she had soft black gloves perfectly tailored to her small hands. The thin lady whose person he had unfortunately collided with puffed daintily at a long cigarette holder, exhaled a plume of smoke and yawned.

"Well, I thought that went rather swimmingly," she said with a lazy smile. Indeed, this absurdly elegant woman had the sleepest, most disinterested face Tom had ever seen.

He was thinking of something to say, but the words got all choked up when he heard the thundering approach of his pursuer. Tom's heart went out to frightened rabbits the world over as panic leapt into him and he darted his eyes about the narrow street, looking for ways to avoid his terrifyingly large pursuer.

"Pardon me, ma'am," Tom said to the thin lady, trying to shoo her out of the way.

"You are quite pardoned," she said, puffing away contentedly on her cigarette, but not making the slightest movement to get out of Tom's way.

"Thief! Vagabond!" roared the giantess. Tom turned to look at the furious large woman in the storming boots and was convinced that there was certainly no way out in that direction.

"Hello there, Batty, darling," said the thin woman to the big angry one.

"Don't you hello me, Agave Nausicaa Iris Fonte de La Croix!" said the big one.

The thin lady waved her cigarette holder playfully, and giggled.

"Oh, you do look a sight when you get angry, Batty darling."

The colossal lady scowled.

"Well, of course I look angry, you infuriating woman. This skinny cub has stolen my bag! All my notes are in there!"

Agave Nausicaa et al. raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow.

"Did you now, you delightful rascal? My, how very clever of you. I've always wanted to live an exciting life of crime, don't you know, but I simply never had the energy."

"Balderdash and rot!" boomed Batty, "Crime! A gangster! Humf! You scarcely have enough energy to get up in the morning, you lazy thing. If it wasn't for me, Agave, I think you'd spend all day lounging around in those damn silly silk pyjama-things, never making anything more blasted substantial than smoke-rings!"

Agave gave Batty a loving peck on the cheek and patted her hand.

"There, there, you are quite right of course, my darling. Now do calm down. You've gone an awfully funny colour and you might have one of them apoplexisms, just like your great-uncle did when that officer lost his hat."

"Nonsense, I'm fit as a fiddle," Batty said sulkily. She seized Tom's arm in a gigantic hand until he squeaked.

"Honest, Ma'am. Miss. Batty. I'm terribly sorry, I must have got a bit confused, is all," Tom spluttered in panic. He felt certain this woman could probably pull his arm off like a roasted chicken drumstick if she had a mind to.

"My name, you impertinent, thieving whippersnapper, is Bathsheba Harcourt! And I will thank you not to take things that most assuredly do not belong to you!"

"He was rather fast, though, wasn't he?" Agave said, "The lad gave you a merry chase. Light on his feet, isn't he?"

Agave De La Croix poked Tom experimentally in the ribs with her cigarette holder and looked at him thoughtfully. With his free hand, Tom thrust the satchel towards Ms. Bathsheba Harcourt.

"Please, Miss," Tom pleaded, squirming in her inescapable grip, "Take it back, I don't want any trouble. Just let me go, and I promise you'll not see me again. You have my word! I have well and truly learned my lesson! Honest, I have!"

"Well, little pup, perhaps a good clout about the ears will make the lesson extra damned sure!" huffed Ms. Harcourt.

"Now, now, Batty, darling, don't overdo it, my sweet," Ms. De La Croix said and winked at Tom, "Never mind my Batty, dear, her bark is worse than her bite."

"Bite indeed! I ought to bite the damned thieving puppy, that'd leave an impression on him and teach him not to take things that blasted don't rightfully belong to him!"

Agave took Batty Harcourt's free hand and patted it indulgently.

"Yes, yes, Batty dear, just as you say, but I do think it might be a trifle unsanitary to chew on the poor little fellow. He'll forgive me, won't he darling? But he clearly hasn't had a good bubble bath in quite some time, has he? You wouldn't want to catch something nasty from him, or worse," Agave giggled, "You might give the poor stray something yourself."

Ms. Harcourt fumed at Ms. De La Croix.

"You infuriating lounge-lizard!"

"Oh do go on, you sweet darling," Agave said, patting Ms. Harcourt's hand some more.

"Feckless dilettante!"

"Quite so, quite so, sweetest."

"Vacuous ninny!"

"My, if you say so, you'd know best, Batty dear."

"You preposterous, maddening, preening clothes-rack!"

"Too true, too true."

At this point, the enraged Ms. Harcourt seemed to run out of steam, her temper expended and no match for the carefree indolence of Ms. De La Croix.

Tom continued trying to squirm out of the vice Ms. Harcourt had for a hand, and still failing to do so, was relieved when Batty Harcourt let go of Tom long enough to hold Ms. De La Croix's dainty little hand in her own oversized palm.

Batty Harcourt took off her shabby gardening hat and wiped the sweat off her face.

"Dash it, I'm sorry, Aggie, I didn't mean half of that. I'm just all steaming because the pup took the maps to the Khalkotauri, the silly fool! It took Iohannis two blasted years to find those brutes, and he almost got the skin taken off his back for his trouble!"

"Pish posh, quite all right, Batty dear, you spoke not a word of a lie anyway," said Agave, blowing a trail of smoke into the air.

Tom thought he would make use of this moment to sneak to freedom, but before he had taken more than a step, he felt himself lifted off the ground by the back of his shirt, winched up into the air by Ms. Harcourt's mighty right arm.

"And h'where do you think you are going, you scrawny scallywag? I

am not done with you!"

Tom gulped out some more unintelligible apologies in every combination and language that popped into his poor stammering mouth. In his more blue days since he had been forced into these difficult straits, he had once or twice suspected that his desperate circumstances might lead to an untimely end, but in his melancholy musings on the topic he had never expected to be mauled by a gigantic angry Englishwoman in the old streets of Thessaloniki.

"Tell me, dear young rascal," said Agave, looking at Tom in mid-air with half-closed, bemused eyes, "Why on earth did you take Batty's awful satchel, anyway? I mean look at it, bless poor dear Batty's heart, but the thing is so frightfully ugly."

"Oh hush up, Aggie," grumbled Ms. Harcourt.

As he was too terrified to come up with a plausible lie, Tom found himself left with nothing but the rather plain truth.

"I was hungry," he said simply, "But if you would let me go..."

"What!" snorted Batty, "Let you dash off again, little greyhound?"

"You know, Batty darling," said Agave, sucking at her cigarette holder pensively, "I've almost had the most splendid idea."

"Gods preserve us," muttered Batty Harcourt.

Agave ignored her.

"Why, the fellow really did go at a frightful nip, and he must have at least a little bit of bottle to try to swindle you, old Battleship."

"Harrumph!" replied Batty.

Tom once again pleaded to be let go.

"We could do with another footman, as you know, Batty dear, after what happened to poor Svetlana,"

Batty Harcourt shook her head sadly.

"Poor, poor Sveta."

He may have had no idea precisely what they were discussing, but Tom was reasonably certain that it sounded unpleasant, and, as it sounded like it involved himself, he would much rather not, if that was all the same to these nice ladies.

"You know, Aggie, you might be on to something there."

Agave waved her cigarette holder with a flourish.



"Oh, I have my moments, darling. I think we might take him with us. Shall we return to the flat? All this excitement has made me dreadfully sleepy. I need to have my mid-afternoon nap."

"Well, actually, I have places to be, you understand. Other places, very far away from where we are right now just at the moment," explained Tom.

Batty Harcourt held him in front of her face.

"Well, pup-lad, you can either be given over to the authorities in a condition very much the worse for wear, or you can jolly well come along with us and keep quiet."

Ms. Harcourt dropped Tom to the earth. She picked him up again and turned him around so he was standing in front of her.

"Don't dawdle, Aggie," hooted Batty, and then turning to Tom, said "Quick march, Pup! Eyes forward, and don't try to run off again, I'll not let you slip away a second time!"

Oh dear, thought Tom to himself.

2.

Without further ado, Tom was marched off by the gigantic Batty Harcourt, with the slinky and yawning Agave De La Croix bringing up the rear. He was pushed up five flights of stairs and ordered into a large apartment overlooking the city and the sea. The room was dark, and shelves of books lined every wall, not to mention the messy piles of books and charts and papers strewn haphazardly on any other surface, and when no clear area was available, the books and things were simply stacked on top of each other in precarious structures.

Batty Harcourt stomped over to a table by the window and swept a collection of material down to one end with her telegraph-pole arm.

She pointed at a chair and thundered "Sit!" imperiously.

Tom duly sat as the gigantic woman loomed over him. He felt clammy. No doubt this was it. The giantess was going to beat him to a pulpy jelly.

He closed his eyes, awaiting the final hammer blow. It arrived with a crashing thud, but not as it seemed, on his own head. Tom opened one eye. The crash had been a large plate of food being dropped onto the table. The plate had been delivered by a tiny old woman wrapped in black, who was wiping her hands on her headscarf, while gesturing

and shouting in Greek at everyone in the room. Batty Harcourt returned fire with her own volley of Greek, but the little old woman clearly knew not of the idea of defeat when it came to irritable shouting, and the impressive Harcourt was in the end forced to retire in submission.

"That's Kyria Tzouma," whispered Ms. De La Croix, "She's the housekeeper for our Society. I can't say why exactly, but she's always jolly cross about everything. I once saw her drive off a whole troop of bandits because they got a bit of mud on her floors." She tilted her head towards Batty Harcourt. "What's she miffed about this time, dearest?"

Batty sniffed. "Oh the usual thing," she said gruffly, "Hasn't a thing in the house, and how dare we bring in strays to feed, and how do we expect her to manage, and do we think she is some sort of sorceress that she can just whip up something out of nothing, and all that sort of thing."

"Well, she'll done mark'bly well at scrapin' together a dec'nt spread from nuffin' anyway," said Agave through an impressive mouthful of food. She had shoved a little bit of everything into her tiny mouth.

"Don't tell her that," said Batty with a scowl, "It'll only make her more enraged."

Tom watched Agave De La Croix put away a remarkable amount of food for someone so slender, and wished fervently that he was trying to do the same.

"Come on then, Pup!" boomed Battle, slapping her hands down on the table, and making the potatoes on the edge of the plate fall off, "We haven't got all day! Start eating!"

For a moment, Tom wondered if this was a trap. Perhaps the food was poisoned? If so, Agave De La Croix appeared to have an excellent constitution for poison, given how much she had already managed to make disappear. There was halloumi, horta, chicken, and lamb, and all sorts of other things crying out to be wolfed down. Tom's mouth started watering. Hunger finally conquered fear, and with less decorum than he would have liked, he began to eat.

The slender Agave De La Croix seemed to view his joining in as something of a challenge, and with eyes fixed sternly on Tom, she redoubled her efforts to clear her side of the plate.

"Kyria Tzouma! Have you seen Mr. Achad?" shouted Battle Harcourt at

the noise of the little woman in black clanging pots and pans in the next room. "We need to get out to the site as quickly as possible if we have any chance of beating Red Hands there!"

The returned shouts of Greek curses made it clear that Kyria Tzouma felt she had enough to be getting on with, thank you very much, without worrying about trying to find every which person about the place, and she didn't expect to be a messaging service on top of every other little thing.

Batty beat her foot impatiently on the ground and muttered under her breath. In the meantime, Agave had eaten her fill. She stretched, lay down on a chaise-longue covered in letters and papers, curled up and appeared to go to sleep without a second thought. Tom was feeling fairly stuffed himself. He leaned back in his chair, content now to face poisoning or being Harcourted to a pulp or thrown from a window or what-have-you.

"Good day, young sir," said a velvety voice by his ear that made him start and give a small eruption of fright. The voice came from a man bowing by his side, dressed in a fine suit the colour of summer twilight and wearing a kufi on his head to match. He was leaning on a cane that had a hooked handle fashioned from some sort of jade, and his hair and beard were iceberg white and neatly trimmed. It seemed to Tom that the man had eyes that looked both very old and very ageless right at the same time, which was rather a neat trick.

"Mr. Achad!" shouted Batty, who had been throwing things loudly in a bag next to Agave's head without having any discernible effect on the latter's nap, "Just the man! Where the devil have you been?"

Mr. Achad gave a small knowing smile.

"That, dear Madame Harcourt, is for the devil to tell." Here he again bowed to Tom, who, feeling rather uncomfortable, wondered if he had any food on his face and whether he should stand up and bow back. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, young sir, and I hope we shall yet keep company for many thousands upon thousands of blessed days yet to come."

"Hello," Tom said uncertainly.

"The Pup is going to work off a debt to us as our new footman, Mr. Achad, you know, to replace poor Sveta."

"Poor, poor Sveta," mumbled Agave in her sleep.

"Do the needful with the paperwork and all that balderdash, will you, Mr. Achad?" shouted Battle.

"It would be my pleasure. As it happens, I have the very items we need right here."

With a flourish, Mr. Achad produced a scroll from somewhere about his person, then hooking the handle of his cane about his arm, he held up a silver fountain pen in his other hand without ever going anywhere near anything like a pocket.

"If you would be so good, young sir, to oblige me with a few moments of your time, we can have the necessary details inscribed with all the swiftness of the rushing winds."

"Are you...a legal clerk?" Tom asked nervously.

Mr. Achad smiled and lowered his head.

"We all have our roles to play, young sir. It is my humble role to provide the Society with what is needed, just as the learned Doctoresse De La Croix is our leading light piercing the mists of ignorance, Ms. Harcourt the bold explorer sailing undeterred through places of unknown danger, and Kyria Tzouma the nourisher of our bodies and souls."

Tom wasn't entirely sure what any of that meant, but before he could try to clear things up, Mr. Achad had unrolled the scroll, which seemed much too long to be practical, and with his fountain pen, began to make obscure annotations on the paper.

"Your full name, young sir?" Mr. Achad began.

"Tomas Kurtz?" Tom said, being not entirely sure himself, just at the moment. In fact, this whole day, which had started with a simple if unpleasant plan of robbery, had now become very flustering very quickly.

Mr. Achad duly scribbled Tom's name in various spots in his sprawling document, before moving on to questions of age, weight, height, nationality, blood type, living relatives, allergic reactions, nervous dispositions, length of time he could hold his breath, frequency of nightmares, and many, many other queries until Tom hardly knew where he was and his mouth had gone dry from replying to Mr. Achad's endlessly polite inquiries.

As if he had been waiting for precisely that moment where Tom couldn't answer a single question more, Mr. Achad had him sign something at the bottom, then immediately filed away the scroll back into the mysterious folds of his jacket, while his fountain pen disappeared with the same sleight of hand with which it had appeared.

The elder gentleman resumed his perch leaning on his cane and gave Tom another bow.

"Young Mister Kurtz, we are overflowing with joyful delight to welcome you as a member of our humble but noble institute, to we of the small band that pursue the work of our Society."

"Well, that's enough chit-chat, it's time to go!" roared Batty Harcourt, throwing a bag into Tom's arms. It was the same bag he had foolishly tried to take earlier in the day, and he felt a bit of resentment towards the blameless object for making him end up stuck in this peculiar situation.

Batty leaned over the sleeping form of Agave and shouted into her ear. "Aggie, chop-chop!"

Agave yawned and stretched, then poured herself off the chaise-longue into a standing position.

"Do just give me a moment, Batty dear, I just need a change of clothes," Agave said.

Batty Harcourt scowled.

"You look fine! We don't have any time for this dilly-dallying! Red Hands might be at the site already! Think what will happen if he finds them before we do. Blood! Chaos! Destruction! And all because you had to bally change your fripperies!"

"Won't be a moment, Batty dear," Agave said with a smile, ignoring Harcourt, and she vanished into a back room.

Batty piled a further stack of what looked like old maps into Tom's arms.

"Mr. Achad!" she boomed, "Is the automobile ready?"

Mr. Achad nodded in acknowledgement.

"As requested, Madame Harcourt, it is a fine chariot that will convey you with all the swiftness that your urgency desires."

"Just so long as it goes! Everything is packed in?"

"Indeed, all is in readiness, Madame Harcourt, and my own humble self will accompany you in your worthy expedition as far as the camp."

Tom opened his mouth to ask exactly what the Society he had been shanghaied into was actually all about, but before he could get more than a syllable out, Batty took the wind out of him when she added

another layer of equipment to the pile of things already in his arms.

At the booming insistence of Batty Harcourt, Agave De La Croix returned, dressed, as far as Tom could tell, in what looked even more like a cross between evening wear and silk pyjamas. Kyria Tzouma emerged and added a bag of food onto Tom's burden, and saw off their party with a dismissive wave and some contemptuous old Greek sayings.

"Come on, Pup, keep up!" Harcourt shouted at Tom, "We have to set out! No time to waste! You work for the Society now!"

3.

They all piled into a pitted automobile that looked like it had been used to cross a desert several hundred times. Battle Harcourt insisted on driving, and squeezed herself into the front seat, with Mr. Achad directing her from memory as they sped out of the city over bumpy roads, until finally there were no roads left at all.

Tom was left in the back seat with bags and books piled so high underfoot that his knees were almost touching his chin. There wasn't much room in the back seat on the horizontal plane either, since Agave promptly declared that driving made her ever so ill, then stretched out and went to sleep. She took up a surprising amount of room for someone so slight.

With the occasional prompt from Mr. Achad in the front, Battle Harcourt drove on like a maniac. She seemed to view driving as a life-or-death contest, and along the way she hunched menacingly over the wheel and vehemently shouted from the window to castigate all other drivers, a donkey cart, and at one point, a rather elderly-looking and confused goat that had the temerity to wander across the broad dusty pathway that Batty considered her domain. Tom was much too banged around by Batty's forceful driving to make himself heard, and his shouted attempts to find out where precisely they were going and why were either drowned out by the rumbling complaints of the automobile in erratic motion, or were simply ignored by the other passengers.

Signs of urban civilization had long since disappeared as they sped on, replaced by sun-baked hills of drying grass and deeply shadowed valleys, where great rocks seemed to be held only by a tangled web of

ancient tree roots from plummeting down cliff faces onto their fragile little vehicle.

At length, Mr. Achad gave one last direction with a serene nod towards a hill-top, and Batty Harcourt brought the automobile to a sudden halt, narrowly missing a collision with some spindly-looking trees that had made the foolish decision to grow in such a perilous position.

Batty squeezed herself out of the car with a grunt, and Tom, to forestall any more bellowing that might have made his head ache even more, began to unload the books and maps and equipment from the automobile. Batty Harcourt dragged Agave from the back seat. The sleeper frowned and grumbled, but did not show any signs of consciousness while being towed, and in fact, seemed to hold her stretched-out sleeping pose even when being hauled about in the air by the larger woman, in defiance of gravity.

Mr. Achad, pointing here and there with his cane, became the quartermaster of the camp, and under his direction, Tom and Batty scurried to and fro from the automobile with canvas and pegs and poles, until a shelter had been established and everything laid out neatly. Agave slowly came awake, but was rather less help in setting up camp, always sleepily getting in Batty's way until Tom began to suspect that the smaller woman was perhaps being intentionally and playfully bothersome in getting underfoot. When Agave's eyes had fully opened, her main contribution had been to establish a chaotic nest of open books and charts that she was constantly digging through and shuffling about.

It was beginning to get dark, in that slow beautiful way that the warm night arrives only in the Greek countryside. Mr. Achad handed out some sturdy-looking metal flashlights.

"The time is indeed ripe, and so you had best set out upon your journey, my good compatriots, if you should have hope to contend in the race with the sinister Red Hands. He cannot be far behind."

Batty nodded, her jaw set firmly.

"We won't let that beast get there first this time," she declared.

Agave, who was experimenting with switching her flashlight on and

off some thirty or forty times and waving it about in the air like a sword, caught the serious tone in Batty Harcourt's voice and nodded in agreement.

"I have the probable pastures memorised," Agave said, clicking her flashlight on and off a few times more for good measure, "We should find them in one of the hidden dells hereabouts. Hopefully Red Hands hasn't found enough of the historical references to track them this time."

Batty shook her head.

"I wouldn't put it past him. I don't know how the bloody monster does it, but he always manages to beat us to the punch. Well, not this time!" roared Batty. Tom felt rather like a newly enlisted lowly soldier being sent into battle by a general, without any clue about where he was being deployed or what exactly the war was all about. He did know that he didn't at all like the sound of this Red Hands, whatever that might be, and he wondered whether that same figure had been responsible for whatever terrible fate had befallen his supposed predecessor, Svetlana. Poor, poor Svetlana, he found himself thinking, although he had never known her, perhaps because he was afraid it was also going to be poor, poor Tomas soon, once he had been marched into the jaws of danger.

"Pay attention, Pup, you'll lead the way. Agave will come behind you to give you directions, and I'll bring up the rear. Keep those flashlights off for as long as you can. We don't want to be giving away our position."

Agave gave Batty a smile and a lazy salute and they began their trek into the unknown folds of the landscape.

"Keep on your toes," Batty said in a loud whisper. Tom supposed that was probably as quiet as she could manage, "If you see our quarry, you need to run about 'em and drive them wherever Aggie tells you. She's got a path where we think they'll be safe from Red Hands."

Tom nodded.

"Right. Only, I don't know what I'm supposed to be running towards, or even what we are doing here."

"We are doing the work of the Society," boomed Batty, forgetting to try to whisper.

"We look after unusual animals that need special care," whispered



Agave.

"What animals? How will I know them if I see them?"

Agave grinned.

"Oh don't worry about that, you'll know them when you see them."

And so they walked on through valleys and woodlands and rocky passages rarely trodden by human feet. Tom fell into a nervous sort of routine, picking his way over the earth in the wisps of remaining light, and following Agave's directions to jump between two large stones, or to carefully tiptoe along the roots of the large tree down across the crack in the ground. When Tom started to trip over unseen pieces of the landscape more often than usual, Batty reluctantly instructed him to switch on his flashlight, but sternly told him to make sure that he kept it low.

The trio marched through a sort of natural tunnel formed in a cliff face and emerged in what Tom thought was a broad cavern. As his light picked its way carefully in front of him, Tom realised that it wasn't exactly a cavern, but a sort of roofed area, where stone and earth jutted out and cast its shadow over a hidden plain, where there were clumps of occasional vegetation between broad dry patches of completely bare earth.

In the distance, Tom saw some soft lights and he stopped suddenly, bewildered and apprehensive. At first he wondered whether the sunset was somehow reversing itself, or whether by some strange quirk of the air, a few last drops of sunlight had been held and reflected into this place. But then he realised that this couldn't be, because the lights in the distance were slowly milling about.

Tom switched off his flashlight to be able to make them out better and crept forward. Why those lights looked almost like they were in the shape of cows! He rubbed his eyes. The lights were cows! There was a whole herd of cattle glowing brightly as if there was some sort of flame inside them!

"Good show, Aggie, you've done it," said Batty Harcourt with an affectionate hand on the slim woman's shoulder.

"Done what?" whispered Tom, "Are those cows on fire? How on earth can that be? Where on earth did they come from?"

"Well, those are some rather interesting questions," Agave said

cheerily, "Awful hard to say how exactly they get that rather lovely flamey effect, of course, but we've known about this delightful lot since at least those myths of the rather odd courtship of Medea and Jason, not to mention-"

"They're Khalkotauri, Pup," interrupted Batty, who was sure that Agave would continue to rattle on for a good while if left to her own devices, "The fire-breathing bronze bulls of Greco-Roman myth."

"But they're just myths!" protested Tom.

"That's precisely why we've got to preserve the blasted things!" pronounced Batty, "And you better get doin' it right now. You get along to the right and I'll stay this end, and we'll see if we can't herd them in the direction we want 'em to go."

"Oh, I don't think you need do that," said a voice from the darkness. The voice came from a round-faced man dressed in full hunting gear - a black riding helmet, big shiny black boots, a fine fern-green coat, and gloves made from a brilliant red leather.

"Oh, Red Hands!" Tom found himself blurting, "I see!"

The man with the red gloves frowned and turned towards two figures behind him - a small woman wearing thick goggles and a large man who had a pair of scars that crossed his face like tram lines and who appeared to be carrying every variety of firearm available on his back, just as a caddy carries golf clubs.

"My name, young man, is Hans, not Hands," pouted the man in the red gloves, "There's no reason to be rude, is there?"

"Keep those guns packed away, Robur," Batty said with a scowl at the big man with the tram-line face, "You won't get a chance to use them here if we have any say in it."

The man called Robur just grunted.

"Moschini, is that you?" chimed in Agave to the small woman in the goggles, "I hardly recognised you, darling. Have you done something with your hair? Perhaps this climate agrees with you."

Dr. Moschini nodded at Agave.

"Good evening, Dottoressa De La Croix," she said in a tense high-pitched voice that sounded like a taut metal cable twanging.

"Your namby-pamby Society cannot keep me from the hunt!" declared Red Hands (or Hans), waving a riding crop in the air, "It is a tradition that stretches back for centuries, my forefathers pitting themselves

against the greatest challenges of nature!"

"I always rather thought that your forefathers and foremothers were sensible vegetable sellers and the like," put in Agave.

Red Hands stomped and his face went a colour that almost matched his gloves.

"You cannot keep me from my prize!" he insisted, "I will have the head of one of those rare fire cattle, by gum!"

"We will not allow it, you gallows-dog!" declared Batty with her hands on her hips, "Not while a single breath is left in our bodies! The little remaining rare and strange in this poor world is not to be hunted down for your childish amusement, you bloody-handed boar!"

For a moment the two parties stared at each other. Tom was for his part not entirely sure where to look, and found his eyes fixated first on Red Hands' crimson leather gloves, then drifting over towards some of the nasty-looking guns bristling on the giant Robur's back. On the plain, one of the impossible flaming cattle made a noise that was part moo and part hiccup. As if this was some sort of signal, Red Hands held his helmet on tight with one hand, swished his riding crop like a sabre in their direction with the other, and gave a garbled cry that was interpreted after a moment's thought by the scarred Robur as a signal to attack.

Pounding down towards them like a terrifying avalanche, the giant stretched out his hands, as if about to gather them all up and crush them into little pieces. Tom suspected he might be able to do it too, and started to dash away towards the fiery cows. He didn't think he was going to be able to pick up enough speed to escape Robur, but as he turned back in panic, he had not reckoned with the mighty opposition of Bathsheba Harcourt. Batty planted herself in front of Robur, her hands on knees like a rugby player awaiting a tackle, and with terrible intention, the giant man collided with her. For one moment Tom was unsure whether even the mighty Harcourt monument could withstand such a crashing force. Just when it looked like the scarred man was going to drive Batty off her feet into the dust, she gave a great roar and with arms bulging pushed Robur back, so the pair were locked there straining at each other, each trying to force the other to concede and topple out of the way.

In the meantime, Agave stood, or rather managed to sort of lounge or lean (even if there was nothing actually physically there for her to lounge or lean upon) next to Dr. Moschini, and lit her cigarette in her long elegant cigarette holder.

"Can I offer you one, Moschi dear?" Agave said, holding out a case. Moschini shook her head and extracted a ragged half-smoked cigarillo that she proceeded to light and puff on. The pair of them looked on the contest between Batty and Robur with vague interest.

"I read that small thing you did on flood myths and migration routes, Moschi dear," Agave said cheerily, "What a delightful modest publication it was! You've such an imagination! Honestly, I could hardly believe what I read on ship-building techniques. Now be honest, you can tell little Aggie, it was all some sort of gag, that bit on pre-Phoenecian maritime technology, wasn't it?"

Dr. Moschini scowled and adjusted her goggles.

"I also had the good fortune to peruse your paper on the treatment of fossils by the Ancients, and must admit that I found one or two points absurdly improbable," said Moschini in a shrill voice.

Agave breathed a smoke ring of disbelief, and Dr. Moschini answered that with an outraged puff from her cigarillo. The pair continued their academic duel with polite cruelty as the physical fight between Batty and Robur proceeded to more intricate wrestling.

The scarred man was the veteran of many tussles, but what he found particularly off-putting about his match with the Harcourt woman was that she kept making distracting exclamations as they struggled, shouting out "Ha!" or "Hup!" or "Take that, rotter!" when they were about the serious business of fighting.

At one point, from inside a headlock, Batty Harcourt boomed "Look lively, Pup! Don't stand about! Drive the cattle into that pass down there! These poltroons won't be able to find them then-" she was cut off by an exasperated Robur, who tried to see if he could convert this headlock move into some sort of facelock so that he could have a moment's peace to work on this bout properly.

Agave took a moment from restrained criticism of Dr. Moschini's arguments about farming techniques of the Bronze Age to call out to Tomas.

"I say, if you could drive them, them Khalkotauri cows, I mean, into the thingy direction over there, there's a network of rocky covered paths where they won't burn tracks. They ought to be safe for a while in there from this lot. Do chase them in, would you?"

Tom twisted himself towards the lowing cattle, not least because Red Hands had decided to get involved in his hunt at last and was now chasing after him in an attempt to reach the strange cows first and

take his trophy before the members of the Society could drive them beyond his reach.

Red Hands lashed out at Tom with his riding crop as he dashed alongside him. For a portly faced fellow, he seemed determined to keep pace with the younger man, no matter how much puff it might take.

"Get-back-here!" Red Hands huffed as he ran. He drew so close that one of his whippings with the crop stung against the very tip of Tom's ear, which was an excellent spur to make Tom pour what reserves of energy he had into his feet to put just a smidge of distance between himself and the hunter.

Unfortunately, as fleet as Tom was, it was tricky to run for one's life and aim at shepherding flaming cows in the dark with one's full attention, and his feet found themselves unsettled by some small bump or clumped sod underfoot. He didn't trip over exactly, seeing as he was a nimble young fellow, but Tom did find himself launched into the air and flailing about. By the time he had got a more sure footing back on earth, he had given the furious Red Hands time to catch up.

The man in the red gloves raised his crop high in the air, ready to brain Tom. The pair of them were now so close to the cattle, that one mother bovine made concerned noises about these rowdy two-legged creatures being so near to her three little glowing calves.

"Ha!" Red Hands declared triumphantly, "What a trophy one of those big ones will make! I wonder if they still smoulder when you chop 'em up?"

Unable to think of anything else to do, and conscious that it was now Red Hands' clear intention to use that riding crop, Tom found himself stretching his hand forth and slapping the mama cow on the flank.

The cow turned, outraged, and her eyes grew large. The old maternal instinct swelled in her many stomachs and she moved to put her large bulk between her calves and these rude invaders.

Tom was conscious that his hand had been burned where it had touched the cow and it was beginning to sting. Nonetheless, he kept his eyes locked on the mother flame-cow, while Red Hands was distracted with the prospect of giving Tom a jolly good thrashing.

The mama cow took a deep breath and then let out a bellow. Alongside that bellow, great gusts of fire shot out from her nostrils.

This wasn't exactly what Tom had been expecting - he thought she might charge them to protect her little ones. In any case, unlike Red

Hands, he was prepared for something to happen at least, and so had dived to one side, narrowly avoiding the jet of flame snorted out by the cow.

Red Hands had not been quite so attentive, and was now running in the opposite direction because his riding crop, fine fern-green jacket, and riding helmet were now all somewhat on fire.

Tom kept a wary eye on the fire-cows and doing his best impression of Batty Harcourt's regular speaking voice, he boomed at the cattle, trying to make himself look big.

They snorted a few more gusts of fire at him, but he was ready to dodge, and they soon saw that it would be far less troublesome for them if they got out of the way of this bothersome and unsightly creature. Bit by bit, the herd began to back off.

Tom whooped and ran about some more. A few calves blew hot steam at him, not yet being big enough to stoke up a fire substantial enough to reach him. His eyes watered from the heat, but they were going into the pass, down into the maze of terrain where Red Hands and his subordinates would not be able to reach them. Last of all to go through was a particularly large bull. Tom swallowed, worried that if the bronze bull decided to gore him, it'd cook him like meat on a spit. The bull snorted a few fireballs, stomped its foot, glared at Tom, then followed after the rest of the herd.

Tom breathed a well-earned sigh of relief.

In the meantime, Robur had been wrestled into the dirt one too many times by the mighty Harcourt, and the silent giant, unable to put up with her noisy and overly-enthusiastic style of fighting, had decided that he had his fill, especially since his employer was rolling around in the dust trying to put out the fires received from the flaming cattle. Red Hands was squealing as he tumbled about on the ground, eyes shut tight, making him look like an overdressed distraught baby. Robur, having decided that was quite enough for one evening, especially since the herd had been driven off, picked up the hunter and slung him over his shoulder, striding off into the distance and motioning with one hand to Dr. Moschini that their group was leaving.

"A delight as always to see you, Dottoroessa," hissed Moschini insincerely to Agave, bowing, then trotting off after Robur and Red Hands on her speedy little legs.

"Batty, darling, you were marvellous!" declared Agave, dusting off the combatant. Batty Harcourt took the compliment with some gentle grumbling and a tiny flush of pride.

On reflection, Tom didn't feel too splendid, probably because of all the excitement, not to mention the burning. He flopped down onto the ground. It was dark now that the glowing herd had departed and he seemed to have lost his flashlight somewhere. Anyway, he'd decided that he would just rest here for a moment until Ms. De La Croix or Ms. Harcourt found theirs.

He was startled by Mr. Achad's voice from nearby.

"Fine work, all, let us return to the shelter of our humble camp in order to tend to those wounds wrought in glory."

"You missed quite a show," mumbled Tom.

Batty Harcourt harrumphed.

"The Pup wasn't all bad, considering. He's going to need a jolly good deal of learnin' if he's going to be of any use in the future, mind." said Harcourt.

Agave winked at Tom.

"That's just her silly cumbersome way of saying 'well done'," Ms. De La Croix whispered theatrically.

"Come on, lazybones," said Batty, lifting Tomas to his feet by his shirt. Tom's legs didn't quite work right for a moment, but after flailing around a bit like jelly noodles, they eventually began to do their job properly and they all followed Mr. Achad back to the camp. Mr. Achad didn't seem to bother with a flashlight at all, tapping out the way with his cane with complete confidence.

Back at the camp either Kyria Tzouma had travelled to join them, or there was an entire tribe of identical Tzoumas spread across the country, because here was the little old woman in black, bustling and complaining about everything under the stars. She took one look at Tomas and put some sort of concoction that smelled of lavender sweets on his burnt palm, before wrapping the hand in bandages while telling him off unceasingly the whole time.

Agave and Mr. Achad were poring over one of the mess of maps and Batty, as a result of her match with Robur, was doing some disconcerting lunges and contortions that she declared were 'warm-down stretches'.

"So we saved those impossible cows," Tom said to himself sleepily, leaning his head back on the canvas of the shelter, "But what's to stop them from hunting them down again?"

"We're to stop 'em," replied Batty gruffly as she hopped on one leg with the other bent behind her.

"And they'll certainly be awfully hard to find in those valleys where you drove them, you splendid little runner!" added Agave.

Mr. Achad inclined his head.

"I have not been idle while you have strived against the forces of dark opposition. I have...convinced the local authorities to make it far more difficult for our hunters to return without facing great and spirited resistance, and I have enjoined the local denizens sparsely scattered about the countryside to guard the area from new intruders, encouraging their proud sense of responsibility for this land."

Tom supposed that would all have to do. His burn ached.

"I'm just happy to be alive," he mumbled, "I wouldn't want to end up squished or smashed or crisped, and that seems a very real danger around your Society. I suppose that was happened to the last one in my place, poor Svetlana."

Batty burst out laughing.

"My dear young twig," Agave said with mock-seriousness, "Poor Sveta faced a far worse fate than all that. She ended up falling in love with a boring accountant who adored her and whisked her off far, far away from us to a life of horrid comfortable everydayness. It was jolly inconvenient."

"In any case, Pup, you've got a damn'd sight more to do to make up for your criminal tendencies!" insisted Batty, "So welcome to the Royal Society for the Preservation and Conservation of Mythical Animals. There's lots more work to be done yet!"